

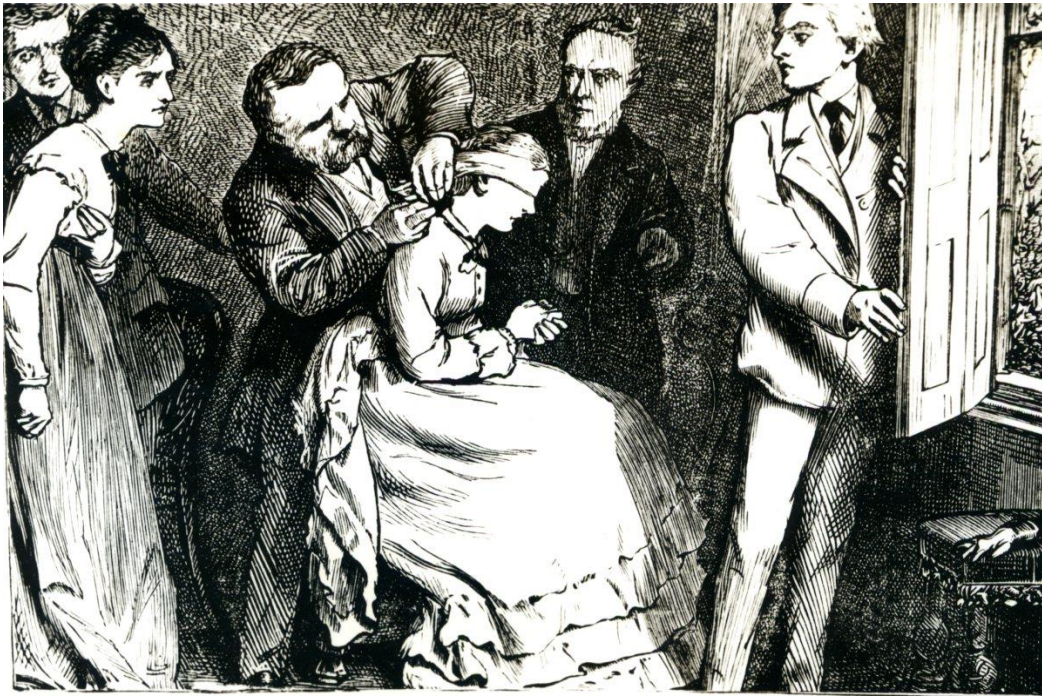


THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

POOR MISS FINCH
AND SOME
LITERARY COINCIDENCES

By

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"Nugent opened the shutters."—p. 252

This edition of
Poor Miss Finch and *Some Literary Coincidences*
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The ‘Maid of Malines’

IS WILKIE COLLINS A PLAGIARIST? This was the bold heading in a short piece in the *Chicago Evening Post* for 23 April 1872, itself probably plagiarised from some unidentified English newspaper. It was written some three months after the January book publication of *Poor Miss Finch* in England and a few weeks after its February issue by Harpers of New York. The otherwise cautiously phrased accusation concerns ‘The Maid of Malines’ the fourth chapter of Bulwer Lytton’s 1834 *Pilgrims of the Rhine*¹ .

Readers who are just now enjoying the pages of “Poor Miss Finch” will be interested in knowing that a grave charge of plagiarism is laid at the door of the author of that work. The story as told by the English critics runs to the effect that the plot is very similar to that of a story in Bulwer’s “Pilgrims of the Rhine.” Wilkie Collins is not directly accused of plagiarism – the gentle phrase employed is “a literary coincidence.”

Bulwer’s story is called “The Maid of Malines.” Eugen St. Amand, young, rich, and handsome, but blind from the age of three years, moved “by a secret unaccountable affinity,” falls in love with Lucille, who is good, and poor, and plain. “Her early childhood had, indeed, given the promise of attractions, but the small-pox had marred the smooth skin and brilliant hues of her face. Lucille longed to restore Eugene to sight, though she had little doubt that if he could see her he would cease to love her. She had heard of a woman whose prayers at the tomb of the Magi at Cologne brought sight to her blind son. A Catholic and superstitious, Lucille resolves to go and pray likewise. There she meets a good priest, who on hearing her story sends her to a certain physician named Le Kain. Le Kain consents to go with her to try and cure the blind Eugene. Meanwhile, St. Amand had not been left alone. Julie, a most beautiful, envious and selfish cousin of Lucille’s, had been constantly about him during the poor girl’s absence. The doctor arrives; St. Amand gladly consents to the experiment of an operation, and it proves successful – but it is at the feet of Julie not Lucille that St. Amand falls.

Here we can add directly from Lytton’s original:

Many in the French as well as the English troops returned home from Egypt blinded with the ophthalmia of that arid soil. Thus was it indeed. By a singular fatality, the burning suns and the sharp dust of the plains of Egypt had smitten the young soldier, in the flush of his career, with a second—and this time with an irremediable—blindness! He had returned to France to find his hearth lonely. Julie was no more,—a sudden fever had cut her off in the midst of youth; and he had sought his way to Lucille’s house, to see if one hope yet remained to him in the world!

With his blindness returned all the feelings she had first awakened in St. Amand's solitary heart.

The *Evening Post* concluded with

In Wilkie Collins' story, "Poor Miss Finch," it is the lady who has lost her sight. Her name is not Lucille, but Lucilla. Her lovers are not cousins but brothers; of whom the right one is generous and the wrong one selfish. Lucilla falls in love with Oscar Dubourg at the sound of his voice and by some mysterious affinity; but when her sight is restored it is not at Oscar's feet that she falls, but at the feet of one Nugent Dubourg. Here is the passage:

She rushed at Nugent Dubourg, so blindly incapable of measuring her distance that she struck against him violently and nearly threw him down. "I know him! I know him!" she cried, and flung her arms around his neck. "O Oscar! O Oscar!"

Those who are curious in such matters will call down Bulwer's "Maid" from the book-shelf, and compare notes for themselves to settle the question whether Wilkie Collins is a plagiarist. The "coincidences" are certainly remarkable.

POOR MISS FINCH

In *Poor Miss Finch* (1872), the heroine, Lucilla Finch, is blind with cataracts. Much of the plot is taken up with the efforts of the eccentric but likeable German doctor, Herr Grosse, to restore her sight and his disagreement with the opinion of the overly conservative English oculist, Mr Sebright. The operation, unfortunately, is only briefly successful.

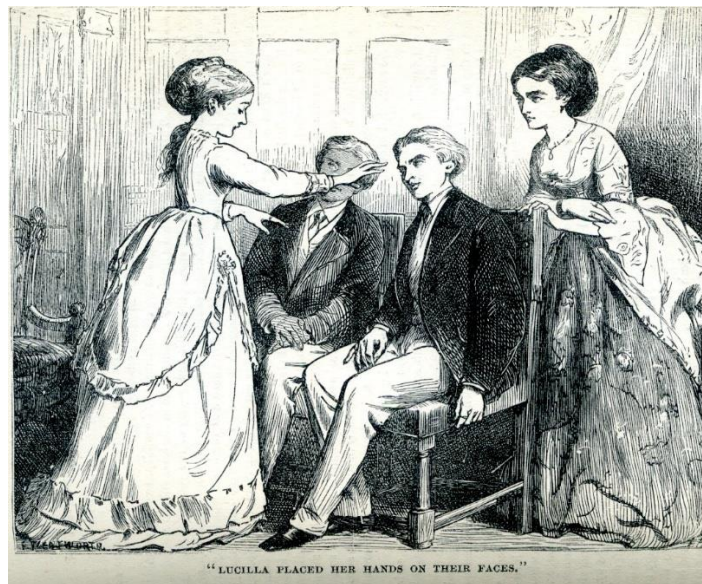
Lucilla falls in love with her close neighbour, the reclusive Oscar Dubourg who begins to suffer from increasingly bad epilepsy after being attacked and robbed. He is offered a cure: prolonged treatment with silver nitrate which has the side effect of permanently staining the skin dark blue.

The only way Lucilla can tell Oscar from his twin brother, Nugent, is by her sense of touch which produces a 'tingle' with Oscar. Knowing of Lucilla's blindness, Nugent brings with him the eccentric and exuberant Herr Grosse, a noted German oculist who examines Lucilla in collaboration with the staid English doctor, Mr Sebright. Their opinions differ but Lucilla, eager to take any chance of actually seeing her beloved Oscar, follows the advice of Grosse and consents to an operation.

Nugent is also in love with Lucilla and knowing her peculiar prejudice against dark colours deliberately creates a confusion of identity. When the bandages are removed, he contrives to be the first person seen by Lucilla and as intended is mistaken for his brother.

Nugent continues the impersonation and tries to press Lucilla into an immediate marriage before the deception can be uncovered. Lucilla's old sense of touch tells her that something is wrong and the stress causes her sight to deteriorate.

Lucilla declares "My eyes are of no use to me!" and after weeks of mental anguish once again lapses into blindness. She immediately recognises her true love by touch and declares "Don't cry about my blindness...The days when I had my sight have been the unhappiest days of my life."



It is very likely that Collins based Lucilla's recovery from sight on a real-life patient reported in the *Lancet* for 25 November 1854 (p. 438) entitled 'A Case of successful operation for congenital capsular cataract on a female aged twenty-two, who had been blind from birth.' The case was presented by George Critchett. "Jane S., aged twenty-two, was brought to the Royal Ophthalmic Hospital in the spring of 1849, suffering from cataract in both eyes ..."

Collins is very likely to have known about treatment with silver nitrate and its side effects of blue skin discolouration since his great friend and confidant, Charles Dickens, is thought to have used the chemical to treat an 'anti-social complaint' in 1859.

MISS WILKINS AND WILKIE COLLINS

We then have another 'literary coincidence' for *Poor Miss Finch*, noted in *The State* newspaper of Columbia, South Carolina on 19 October 1902, referring to the publication of 'Eglantina' in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* for August 1902. This story was written by Mary Wilkins, better known as the prolific author, Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman.

A curious parallel is drawn by a correspondent of the *New York Times Saturday Review* between a recent story by Miss Wilkins and one of the less familiar of Wilkie Collins's novels. There is no question of plagiarism because the fundamental idea is such as might occur to any one, but the likeness is certainly curious.

Wilkie Collins is counted rather old-fashioned these days and his tales are regarded as little more than sublimated shilling shockers. It is interesting, therefore, to note that Miss Wilkins, the New England realist in miniature, in her last story in one of the current magazines, has closely paralleled in plot and treatment one of the most fantastic of Wilkie Collins's tales. Read the story of "Eglantina" in the August Harper's and the diverting but highly improbable, tale of "Poor Miss Finch" will be immediately called to mind. Eglantina is tall and fair – tall, at least, to her lover, who is blind. Oscar Dubourg is tall and fair – fair only to blind Miss Finch. But Eglantina to the world is not wholly beautiful to look upon so far as outward beauty is concerned, for on her face is a hideous scar, like a great purple-red rose, a mark she had borne since birth. Oscar Dubourg is known to all but Lucilla Finch as "Blue Face." As a cure for epilepsy he had taken nitrate of silver, and his face is a hideous purplish blue. And poor Miss Finch, dwelling ever in darkness, has an abhorrence for all that is not light and beautiful. But Eglantina's lover knows nothing of her deformity, and Lucilla Finch knows not the terrible significance of Blue Face."

There comes the time when both Eglantina's lover and Poor Miss Finch have the opportunity to have their sight restored. Poor Eglantina and poor Oscar Dubourg! "If Roger gains his sight," says Eglantina, "he loses love." "Her life is in her love, and her love is in her blindness," is said of poor Miss Finch. "Then I shall see you, I shall see you." Says Eglantina's lover. "The time is coming, my darling, when I shall see [sic] you," says poor Miss Finch. And both poor Miss Finch and Eglantina's lover wonder at the strange silence of their lovers. "Are you not glad that I am to see you, sweetheart?" says Eglantina's lover. "Why is he not as eager as I am?" cries poor Miss Finch.

With sight restored, Eglantina's cousin is made to take her place, and Oscar Dubourg is supplanted by his brother Nugent. In neither case, however, is the deception successful. "He will have none of me," says Eglantina's cousin, and poor Miss Finch says of the brother Nugent, "I have so little feeling for him that I sometimes find it hard to persuade

myself that he is really Oscar.” Miss Finch loses her sight again, for not even Wilkie Collins could make a woman insensible to the repulsiveness of a “Blue Face.” But Eglantina’s lover sees, and to him she is always “Eglantina, tall and fair.”

The full text of ‘Eglantina’ can be found online at babel.hathitrust.org.

WAS COLLINS A PLAGIARIST?

There are, indeed, similarities between ‘The Maid of Malines’ and *Poor Miss Finch* - as there are with the later ‘Eglantina’. Facial disfigurement, substituted identity, sight lost, recovered and lost again. But there are striking differences between Collins’s novel and these other tales. Most importantly, *Poor Miss Finch* is a full-length novel of about 100,000 words with a variety of sub-plots; Lytton’s short story is a modest 11,000 words, and ‘Eglantina’ a mere 4,500.

There is good evidence that Collins could have taken the central idea of recovery from blindness from an established medical case. He was good friends with his doctor, Frank Beard, and personally acquainted with Critchett who presented the case history. Critchett, in fact, was Collins’s personal oculist whom he consulted for what he called ‘gout in the eyes.’ He knew that Dickens had taken silver nitrate and would have been aware of its side effects. Then, the genders of the main protagonists have critically been switched.

Collins was keen to take incidents from real life to include in his novels. As early as *Basil* (1852) he notes “I have founded the main event ... on a fact within my own knowledge” and *Blind Love* (1890) was enthusiastically based on the Von Scheurer insurance fraud. Themes of identity and doubles run throughout Collins’s stories beginning with ‘The Twin Sisters’ (1851), doubles and identity in *The Woman in White* (1860) and substituted identity in *The New Magdalen* (1873). Although there were four volumes of Bulwer Lytton’s works in Collins’s library², there was no copy of *The Pilgrims of the Rhine*.

It is inconceivable that Collins would resort to plagiarism, a practice along with copyright theft he had been fighting for years. It is no more reasonable to accuse Collins of plagiarism than it would be to accuse Dickens of ‘literary coincidence’ for creating the self-sacrificing Sydney Carton of *A Tale of Two Cities* when compared with Collins’s character Richard Wardour in *The Frozen Deep*.

Finally, Collins was still at the peak of his creative ability following his four great novels of the 1860s. He had no need to borrow plots and ideas from other authors. Indeed, he was invariably the copied not the copier.

A MODERN POSTSCRIPT

Collins's account of Lucilla's blindness and her early attempts at seeing confirm his most careful research, exactly as he had carried out when describing the deafness of Madonna in *Hide and Seek* (1854). Collins seems to have been aware of visual psychology and perception. His descriptions of Lucilla's disorientation, lack of spatial judgement, dislike of dark colours, and her continuing inability to recognise shape and form except by touch all bear a striking resemblance to a 20th century case history of a Mr S.B. recorded by Gregory in 'Recovery from Blindness', written in 1963, nearly 100 years later³. Both fictional and true cases end badly. S.B. retains his sight but, like Lucilla, suffered a psychological crisis.

His story is in some ways tragic. He suffered one of the greatest handicaps, and yet he lived with energy and enthusiasm. When his handicap was apparently swept away, as by a miracle, he lost his peace and his self-respect.

There is another irony in that Lucilla was very likely based on a real-life case, whereas Herr Grosse was purely fictional – but so convincing was his unconventional character that Collins was inundated with letters from readers demanding the name of the real life doctor on whom he was modelled. It is also possible that Collins had learned from Critchett about the famous Austrian oculist, Georg Joseph Beer (1763-1821), who, like Grosse, was at odds with establishment ophthalmology represented by Mr Sebright in the novel.

So, in the case of *Poor Miss Finch* over a period of nearly 100 years, fiction imitates real life and real life imitates fiction. But plagiarism? To quote one of Collins's own titles, emphatically "I SAY NO!"

¹ *The Pilgrims of the Rhine*, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, London: Saunders and Otley, 1934.

² *Wilkie Collins's Library: a Reconstruction*. William Baker, Westport (Connecticut): Greenwood Press, 2002.

³ 'Recovery from Early Blindness: A Case Study.' Richard L. Gregory and Jean G. Wallace, reproduced in March 2001 from *Experimental Psychology Society Monograph No. 2*, 1963. (Now available online).